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EPA director Leavitt's Libby visit to be rescheduled

U.S. Sen. Max Baucus announced last week that Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Mike Leavitt's May 26 visit to Libby will be rescheduled because of scheduling conflicts.

The former Utah governor promised Baucus he would visit Libby personally to assess asbestos cleanup activities there following years of vermiculite mining by the bankrupt W. R. Grace & Co.

Baucus said the visit will be rescheduled in either June or July, which also may enable Sen. Conrad Burns (R-Mont.), Rep. Dennis Rehberg (R-Mont.) and Gov. Judy Martz to attend.

"This will work better for everybody," Baucus said.

Baucus said he would like for Leavitt to, among other things, tour the Center for Asbestos Related Diseases — a clinic Baucus

helped establish with federal funds — and hold a town hall meeting.

Baucus has been critical of the EPA's slow cleanup progress, noting the agency has identified more than 1300 properties in Libby that still require cleanup and that the agency's timeframe for cleaning up the town has been pushed back from 2004 to 2008. The agency has been in Libby since November 1999 and Baucus says it's unacceptable that the agency has completed only 10 percent of the cleanup work needed to give the town a clean bill of health.

"It's important to me that we present a united front when it comes to doing what's right for Libby," Baucus said, noting his office is working to set a new date for the visit.